

How to Express Difficult Feelings

By Ginger Blume, Ph.D.

As a young child, I heard adult's caution, "Be careful or you'll **kill him with kindness.**" When I tried to imagine what they meant, I pictured a person killing someone while they wore a sweat smile on their face. After hearing the phrase repeatedly for years, it lost its' ability to capture my imagination. With luster worn off, I chalked it up to utter nonsense.

Only decades later did I come to understand the sage meaning behind this odd saying. Because the notion of "killing someone with kindness" is a mixed metaphor of opposites, its' meaning was difficult to comprehend. Perhaps, to kill with kindness implied a clever deception or unexpected outcome. One is certainly left to wonder, "Can kindness really kill?"

I believe it can kill in at least three different ways. First, killing another with kindness may be done consciously with either a malicious or a positive intent. When the intent is secretive, it represents a conscious attempt to throw someone off track. Remember the historical story of the Trojan Horse." The large wooden horse was delivered as a gift – a gesture of kindness. However, inside the horse was an army, prepared to kill the enemy. As the horse was being rolled into Troy, the army was smugly waiting inside, secure in their deception. Counting on human nature to run its course, they knew a gift wouldn't be refused and they were exactly right. Their "act of kindness" easily opened up the locked gates of Troy and the city was destroyed.

When kindness represents a conscious and positive intent to please, it can still kill another person. Perhaps, the saying that "too much of a good thing is bad," explains how the tables can turn quite suddenly from good to bad. Have you every wanted to help someone so much, that you overwhelmed them with you helpfulness? Sometimes parents try so hard to protect their children from the harsher realities of life, that they over-protect and eventually harm their child's development. When kindness is over done, it can kill.

Sometimes, a person genuinely believes his act of kindness is real. Unlike the Trojan Horse scenario, this person is misguided and uninformed about the nature of real kindness. As a psychologist, I've seen many people inadvertently "kill their loved one or their relationship with kindness." Marriages fall apart because one or both of the partners has a mistaken idea of what kindness really is. For instance, sometimes a spouse attempts to protect their partner from some painful truth or upsetting event. This "protection" typically charades as a genuine act of kindness. The "killer" behaves as if s/he is being caring by virtue of keeping negative or troubling information from earshot

of their loved one. You know the rationalization: “I didn’t want to upset you. I thought you had too many worries already. I was just trying to help you out.”

Unfortunately, by the time the deadly repercussion from such “kindness” occurs, it is so far removed from the original event that the crucial cause and effect connection is lost. Hence, the illusion of protecting someone via our act of kindness remains intact. Yet, stop and consider your own experience. How often have you personally felt “duped and hurt” by someone “protecting” you from some negative news? If this pattern of relating continues for any significant amount of time, the relationship begins to wither on the vine. Without the nurturing effect of trust, truth, and openness, the relationship eventually suffers.

Yes, kindness can and does kill relationships. Yet, rarely does the perpetrator of “kindness” recognize or acknowledge the damage done by his/her “positive act.” Sometimes the truth is lost because the “kind behavior” is actually a selfish act masquerading as a positive one. In this case, the deception is one of self-deception rather than misleading the other as to your true intent. We all know how easy it is to avoid talking about a difficult topic. It’s easy to convince yourself that the other person is probably better off not knowing what you know. In essence, your act of kindness is protecting you, while killing them!

And here lies the paradox: a *kind intent* can cause *damage* to your significant relationship. If you do something with the conscious intent of saving a loved one some grief, you may be hurting the relationship more than you ever imagined. If you see yourself “killing your loved one with kindness” consider the effect of your behavior, rather than focusing on your positive intent. By focusing on how some acts of kindness can carry inside them a kernel of destruction, you’ll have a much better change of heeding this sage advice:

“If you’re not careful, you’ll kill them with kindness.”